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COMMUNICATION IN A MULTICULTURAL VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: Learning Communication Skills in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutes and global, transnational work life networks have created a real need for intercultural communication skills where using a foreign language is essential for successful communication. In higher education institutes' courses are often organized virtually in a transnational environment that has an effect on the communication process. This paper reports upon a case study focusing on dimensions of communication competence in a virtual learning environment on a pilot virtual course shared between three Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (FUAS) and taught by the authors in spring 2012. The empirical data were gathered from learning diaries, forums, and videos from the virtual course. By investigating the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of individuals of foreign origin and their Finnish peers participating in the course, the aim was to understand the existing communication skills and the competence needed for different agents to cooperate and work side by side in environments that are becoming even more transnational. From the findings it can be argued that the whole process of e-learning needs to be rethought, since it was seen by participants as something in addition to their studies that encroaches on extra-curricular time. A third culture in the virtual learning environment needs to be created. Results also indicate that motivations and attitudinal orientation are crucial in virtual communication: this course was seemingly task-oriented, but ultimately it also enhanced personal communication skills. As expected, acquiring new IT skills was seen as challenging but rewarding and learning the other party's native language was seen as an asset in being accepted into the surrounding community. The crucial role of time-orientation in nonverbal communication for resolving communicative conflicts was also illustrated and highlighted more in the virtual environment.

Keywords: Third Culture, Virtual Learning, Communication Competence

1 Introduction

With globalisation and increasingly transnational work environments, intercultural communication skills have become a core competence for nationally and internationally effective businesses (Väyrynen 2000: 32-33) and need thus to be taught in higher education institutes. Transnational work and learning environments make it possible to practice these skills in various ways, but virtual learning environments are also becoming more popular. Learning in a virtual environment does, however, pose novel challenges. When teachers and students do not get to meet face-to-face, there is a need to consider many special factors when planning and implementing courses. Foreign language skills, selecting a common, shared language (usually English) and cultural and technology related issues are among the key issues one needs to be aware of. In the present paper these issues are discussed from the perspectives of virtual learning courses in higher education institutes. Virtual learning environments alter communication and may even hinder students from building social relationships needed to communicate and work effectively. Linguistic and communication skills, socio-cultural knowledge and personal attitudes as well as transferring professional skills to a virtual learning and working environment are the key areas in effective co-operation. This is especially important to take notice of in virtual courses.

Virtual communication also has some benefits compared to face-to-face communication. When communicating via an e-mail or a blog, you do not have to wait your turn and you are not interrupted before you have made your point. You can take your time to read messages and think them through, and also to formulate your answer and point of view. For many it is easier to read and write a foreign language than to listen and speak it. E-mail discussions are also easily shared with others and they serve as documents or memos of discussions. Berry (2011: 189–198) claims that virtual communication is more issue-specific than face-to-face communication, and emphasises the efficiency of issue-specific communication. In issue-specific communication, ideas presented by participants and feedback given to colleagues are more direct, and evaluations of fellows are based on their work rather than their personality. Moreover, there are fewer problems caused by stereotyping, power relations, personalities, group forming and political conflicts, and learning of all participants increases when different points of views are represented.

This paper introduces a research focusing on dimensions of intercultural communication competence in a virtual learning environment. A case study approach was used to study a virtual course organised by three Finnish Universities

of Applied Sciences in spring 2012. The Federation of University of Applied Sciences (FUAS) is a strategic alliance formed by HAMK, LAMK and Laurea and Universities of Applied Sciences who have agreed on a common strategic intent for 2020. This strategic intent is to be an internationally respected federation of independent Universities of Applied Sciences that strengthens the international competitiveness of the Greater Helsinki Metropolitan Area, offering higher education, research and regional development services required by the metropolitan area's business life and population.

This course (FUAS Intercultural Communication Today, 5 ECTS) was the first of three elective courses in the FUAS Intercultural Studies (15 ECTS credits) aimed at Bachelor level, to both full and part-time students. The three courses approached intercultural communication from different perspectives. The aim of this first course was to enlarge and deepen the students' understanding of the core concepts, challenges and possibilities of intercultural communication from cultural, communication and language skills perspectives. The course also aimed at providing students with an understanding of the most popular theoretical frameworks and an understanding of the key terms of intercultural communication and cultures from various perspectives. The course was for the first time, so there was a real need to do a case study of it in order to be able to develop it further.

In the beginning of this article the conceptual dimensions of intercultural communication competence, namely cognitive dimension, skills and attitudinal orientation, are introduced and the use of common, shared foreign language is discussed. In the next chapter the case study in a virtual learning environment is introduced. The following chapter concentrates on analysing the gathered data, and based on that analysis the conceptual dimensions of intercultural communication competence in relation to virtual learning environments and their special features are discussed at the end.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication in different contexts and professions will inevitably take different forms and requires different skills from individuals. Therefore teaching the required skills for future professionals is demanding. The term *intercultural* can be defined as a situation where representatives on different cultures interact with each other. In case the communication is intercultural the interaction may include aspects of the counterpart the participants do not feel they can relate to or understand. Cai, Wildon & Drake (2000) found in their respective study of intercultural negotiation situations that contextual collectivism increases the joint profit, but that the *culture in context* perspective facilitates both the negotiation and enhances the understanding of the cultural values of others. The following definition by Spitzberg and Cupach is significant for the aims of the present paper, as they write that intercultural communication is

a symbolic, interpretative, transactional and contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviours that should be used to create shared meanings.
(Spitzberg & Cupach 1993: 58)

In multicultural environments, the exchange of opinions and thoughts between individuals and groups is often uncertain: intercultural communication can be seen as communication between such social groupings whose shared images of the symbolic reality are not completely correlative to each other. When the communication is both verbal and non-verbal the risk of misinterpretations is smaller compared to virtual leaning environments (later referred to as VLE) where communication means trying to bring the different worldviews and meaning attributions closer to each other through and with the help of verbal interaction. VLEs require various communicative skills from both the lecturers and the students, and it can be considered to be an intercultural communication culture in itself. Intercultural communication has not been researched in this context a lot.

2.2 Third culture

When discussing intercultural communication competence it is important to notice that the most important factor in effective, successful, reciprocal and equal communication is that all individuals approach the communication situation from the perspective of thirdness. Kramsch (1993, 2006) and Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) have developed the concept of *third culture* to describe situations where people use a shared language which is not a mother tongue to either party. According to the authors, in the situations of third culture, communication ends up being of better quality than in situations where someone's native language is being used. A cooperative orientation that supports both

communication and shared goals is easier to accomplish in social situations where other aids, such as shared and commonly known rules of action, common (professional) background knowledge, clear contextual restrictions such as time constraints or other resources, can also be utilised in order to help communication. On virtual courses the teachers have a big part in providing this kind of background information so the course can run smoothly.

It is more difficult to construct a third culture in virtual work communities where less information is shared than in face-to-face communities. The tools utilized in the communication have various effects, too. First of all, people may feel more insecure when they cannot utilise and interpret facial expressions and gestures in communicating via phone, chat or e-mail. Secondly, constructing a third culture slows down when people do not learn to know each other due to a lack of face-to-face connection, resulting in difficulties in understanding others' beliefs and practices and creating false expectations. (Berry 2011: 189-195.) In addition, members of a virtual community do not necessarily know the restrictions or advantages of technological communication tools, and are not able to utilise them in the most beneficial ways (Grosse 2002: 22).

In this paper the emphasis is on the skills needed in constructing a third culture. A third culture does not need to be equal and it may favour some participants over others. However, as Kramsch (2006), Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) point out, the perspective of thirdness is an important requisite for successful reciprocal communication. In a VLE this might be easier than in a normal classroom, since participation can be from where ever students wish to be. Thirdness is a crucial starting point in contemporary higher education: learning and innovation becomes easier with more voices and viewpoints. Working in a VLE might enhance equal intercultural communication, since all students are on their preferred locations and course parameters are the same to all participants. A prerequisite for this is that all participants know the shared rules of working in a VLE, goals of the virtual course and common rules of action. The teachers' role in facilitating this kind of learning process is at the core, but taking part in a virtual course demands a lot from the students, too.

2.3 Intercultural communication competence

2.3.1 Cognitive dimension

The present study was based on examining third culture, intercultural communication and their components, one of them being *cognitive dimension*. The hypothesis was that intercultural communication in a virtual learning environment is effective only if the participating individuals share a common understanding about what communicative and professional practices are appropriate and meaningful. These practices include written and oral communication in different languages as well as virtual communication. If the participants in the communication situation are from different cultural backgrounds, this kind of shared basis may not exist or it may not be substantial. In VLEs differences in interpreting the meaningfulness of different aspects of intercultural communication are even greater, since the possibility of misinterpreting one's behaviour and information is larger, due to lack of face-to-face contact and other factors of the virtual environment. Therefore it is vital that participants are able to create and sustain a shared communicative basis by negotiation, and a common language is the core of this negotiation process. When this common language happens to be a foreign language to all participants, the manner in which this language is used, has to be negotiated, too. Otherwise the participating sides are not able to build a solid foundation for the communicative process.

2.3.2 Skills

In a virtual learning environment, people need various skills in communication and social interaction. This presents a challenge for higher education. It is not realistic to assume that internationalization can happen simply through foreign language education, language courses, international courses or short periods of student exchange, but it requires more thorough and long-term planning and dedication (Crawford & Bethell, 2009:189-213). The ability to jointly negotiate and develop a third culture framework upon which interaction and communication may be based may be considered as a competence consisting of many skills relevant to intercultural communication. At the core of all these aspects lies an ability to understand and process new (social) environments (Cummins 2000: 8), readiness for information transfer and acting together in social contexts (cf. Lasonen & Halonen 2009; Friedman & Antal 2005, Holden 2002; Hammar-Suutari 2005: 115; Sercu 2004). Information can be public or context-specific, subjective information. Koehn and Rosenau (2002) add the ability for listening and understanding to the previous list, whereas Fantini (1997) emphasises an ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language without changing the meaning of the message conveyed. When students cannot meet or communicate face-to-face, conveying a message effectively in a foreign language and listening to others become key skills in successful intercultural communication.

A common language is an important factor when negotiating meanings and practices of communication, i.e. constructing a third culture. People need skills in the given common language to be able to negotiate a shared set of rules, roles and expectations which guide their communication. When a common language is a foreign language for all participants of an intercultural encounter, its meanings and terms are not shared, and therefore must also be negotiated. If cultures are not shared, a variety of possible meanings exist. If participants are not aware of the existence of various meanings, and if they are not able to explore and negotiate them, there is a risk of serious misunderstandings. Misunderstandings also happen because the participants may not understand a common language perfectly, or do not speak or write it very well. Various pronunciations and intonations may also be difficult to understand and netiquette not understood in a similar manner. Moreover, people use a foreign language easily in the ways they use their native language. For example, in different cultures people express politeness in different ways, and the normal way of talking in one culture may be impolite in another. Moreover, when working in a virtual environment, one may face challenges in adapting communication style to meet the demands set by technology.

Nonverbal communication is somewhat missing in a VLE, which makes achieving intercultural communication competence challenging and emphasizes communication skills, too. According to Taft (1981: 76-77), in a VLE, it is important to communicate in a relaxed and appropriate manner and to be able to change the communication according to feedback if so needed. In a VLE getting feedback may be delayed and that will have an effect on communication. Further, using communication technology requires different skills from the students, since the patterns of work, decision-making processes and social networks are different than in a normal classroom—even more so, when some of the work is asynchronous (Berry 2011:186). It is also important to remember that one does not have to master all the aspects mentioned above, but to be able to compensate the weaker skills with the stronger ones.

2.2.3 Attitudinal orientation

Motivations and attitudinal factors are also crucial for successful intercultural communication. Attitudes can be said to be comprised of three components: interests, values and tendencies towards self, others and the surrounding context (Inal, Ercan & Saracaloglu 2005:38-40). Attitudes by nature consist of cognitive, affective and behavioural components. Byram (1997) points out that positive attitudes are required in order to develop the skills to relate, discover, interpret and negotiate the differences between one culture and another. Socially constructed and communicated attitudes are often related to social and ethnic identities. In the present study the focus is on attitudes towards working on a virtual course, i.e. a virtual learning environment, since this context may propose novel challenges for students as well as teachers.

Learning and using a foreign language on a course that is not a language course poses both positive and negative challenges. When students' language skills are not evaluated as they would be during a foreign language course, they may either feel free to use it or not see any reason to use it at all. Another factor is, naturally, the attitudinal orientation towards the VLE, which will have similar effects on the outcome (Berry 2011:199). Some students will more likely be at ease with using multimedia, VLEs and social media, whereas others may feel that the absence of face-to-face contact will make learning more challenging for them. Opinions and attitudes towards VLEs somewhat depend on the available options used in a given institute. However, we might not know how our background limits our thinking and action until we encounter misunderstandings or poor results in intercultural encounters (Cunliffe 2004: 412). Difficulties in performing well technologically i.e. lack of technological know-how, will have an effect on the whole learning process.

The lack of nonverbal communication may pose challenges to some students, and creating social relationships may be more difficult than it would be on a normal course (Walther 1995 in Berry 2011: 197). Resolving misunderstandings and conflicts is at the core (Berry 2011:202) when facilitating communication. Thus, leadership and clear roles in virtual teams are essential in order for the students to be able to finish the given tasks in time (Berry 2011:199-202). A virtual learning environment requires strong leadership from the teachers as well.

Many challenges in intercultural communication are solved more easily in face-to-face encounters than via virtual communication. Moreover, solving conflicts is more difficult when there are no natural possibilities for informal discussion (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews 2006: 34). On a virtual course there are bound to be differences in used learning platforms, course registration and common study guidelines. These differences will affect students' attitudes towards learning. Hence, in a virtual learning environment there is a large amount of conscious and unconscious cultural assumptions and expectations that are utilized in interpretation of events and behaviour of colleagues. The construction of a third culture is vital, since without it, students interpret tasks, deadlines and messages by utilising meanings present in their own, local cultures. In the absence of a third culture the probability of misunderstandings increases (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews 2006: 33; Bjørn & Ngwenyama 2009: 227).

3. Data and methods

The research questions were as follows: (1) What kind of communication skills are needed in virtual learning environments and (2) how can a third culture be built in a virtual learning environment? In this article the focus is on utilising the transnational or intercultural networks and their possibilities in a virtual learning environment. Do the students see a lack of skills in a given language to be a hindrance or a barrier or do they use language merely as a tool for positioning, or do they define their identities through native or foreign languages? What kind of skills, attitudes and knowledge are required from virtual course teachers?

A case study research method was used in describing and analysing the data gathered from the VLE, due to the small size and heterogeneity of the sample. The aim was to create a discussion between data and theory in this specific contemporary context. In case studies, such as the present study, the phenomenon being studied can contain many variables that do not require control during the research. With this method it is possible to plan, design, collect, analyse and reflect on information both during and after the case project, and the information can then be shared to develop the virtual courses in the near future. After reading and theming the data the following themes emerged as the basis of the present research: a) cognitive dimension b) skills and c) attitudinal orientation in intercultural VLEs. This paper also illustrates the important notion of creating a third culture in order to facilitate and uphold effective communication in the virtual learning environments. The contents of the course and the researchers' personal interests have had an effect on the research and the interpretations done on the basis of the data. (Yin 2009)

The material was obtained from eleven FUAS students, who took part in the virtual course during spring 2012. They represented eight nationalities and had various national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Both genders were represented almost equally (six women and five men). Among the eleven participants three of them considered themselves to have dual nationalities (two were Finnish/Russian and one Japanese/Chinese) the remaining nationalities were (three Finns; three Chinese; one Nigerian; and one Vietnamese).

The research data was gathered from various multimedia sources with the primary source being reflective learning dairies (referred to later as LD) which were written by the students during the course. Some of the spelling mistakes have been corrected in the LD quotations to facilitate understanding, but most of the entries are in their original form. Other sources include written or videoed responses to individual and group assignments, question and discussion forums, and email correspondence.

Moodle and Adobe Connect were chosen as the virtual mediums to conduct the teaching. Moodle is an acronym for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment* often referred to as a VLE. Moodle offers many tools that support the learning process and enable students to interact and reflect on what they see, feel and learn. These tools included learning dairies, in which students could reflect in lecturer-guided dairies (only viewable by the author of the diary and the lecturers); forums that were used to facilitate discussion and were also used as places to return and discuss tasks; return folders that could be viewed by all the course participants were also used. Adobe Connect (AC) was used in this course for virtual presentations and virtual meetings with the whole group. The first and the last session in the course were synchronous sessions in which group forming and final reflection in a virtual learning café were conducted respectively. Asynchronous lectures during the course were created in AC and the links were added to Moodle on a fixed schedule. YouTube was also used as a distribution channel for the students' videos as Moodle did not allow such large files to be uploaded. Students added their YouTube video links to the forums in Moodle, after which they were commented upon and discussed.

4 Findings

This paper focused on illustrating an intercultural virtual learning environment and the special skills it requires and discussing the notion of creating a third culture in a virtual learning environment. The main purpose was to investigate issues arising in the virtual space in which intercultural communication is realised, as well as the language of communication. The aim was not to simply describe the interpersonal communication situations between people from different cultural backgrounds, but more to analyse the aspects of intercultural communication competence that are essential in a VLE.

Due to this course being foremost a virtual course on intercultural communication, there was a lot of reflection on the role of language and cultural identity and how language affects behaviour: language "*is a mirror to reflect your culture*" (LD) and that "*it gives a sense of belonging*" (LD) without which "*I will be lost and identity-less*" (LD). One of the required tasks during the course was that students had to interview someone on intercultural issues in a working

environment. One of the groups, consisting of one Finn and an international student, decided to conduct the interview in Finnish because they *“didn't want the foreign language (English) to affect her expression (because language really does have an impact on it)”* (LD). It was mentioned in some of the LD entries that poor English language skills do cause misunderstandings especially in oral communication. One LD entry mentioned that a student had lost motivation to study and even speak English due to people finding it hard to understand his accent. There were both negative and positive feelings towards using a foreign language (here English) as a *lingua franca*. Some students viewed it as a hindrance and also *“When ...communicating with English I lost part of myself”* (LD) *“...my self-expression suffers when I do. I'm a slower speaker, my language is more simple and I think twice (sometimes three times) before I say anything...(LD)”*. There were also positive feelings: *“I always feel somehow more alive when I communicate in some other language than my own mother tongue.”*(LD). The importance of finding a fairly equal third space between native speakers and secondary or tertiary speakers was highlighted as *“native speakers have more advantage of communication or non-native speakers are quiet”*. As this study was conducted in Finland some of the comments also reflected on the language and communication requirements needed in this country. Comments were made on the lack of contact with Finnish people and lack of Finnish friends is considered a barrier to accessing the society and acquiring the language. To support this there was a comment from someone who had learned Finnish to a certain degree and felt he was accepted differently and made friends more readily when he conversed in the language.

There seemed to be contrasting views on the role of mistakes in misunderstanding written communication: *“Even though there are spelling mistakes, we can understand each other quite well..”* and spelling or grammar mistakes rarely caused major misunderstandings, while others thought that there were often problems. This was also connected to the problem of finding the balance between informality and formality. Contextual communication and the ability to change communication style according to the recipient were also reflected on in the LD entries with plain simple, *“unemotional”* language being emphasised to facilitate understanding. The importance of proactive communication and opening alternative communication methods was mentioned, for instance, if an email is not responded to, then it is possible to call. The importance of reflecting on and clarifying one's own communication intention was also mentioned and was also something teachers had to focus on when communicating with students during the course. The lack of visual cues and gestures in this virtual course also caused problems according to some of the LD entries, an example of which can be seen from:

I've been missing face to face group work during this course and I've realized how much effort it takes to successfully inter-culturally communicate online without actually meeting the person...there have been some misunderstandings and difficulties that perhaps wouldn't have been there if we had met face to face. (LD)

This was actually tested in the course: One of the recorded lectures was given without a camera recording, i.e. the lecture only consisted of an oral presentation. The lack of visual cues and how it bothered the students and made the lecture harder to follow was actually noted in the LDs. The importance of using audio, visual and written communication in virtual courses and presentations was also commented on. This was highlighted as some of the group work was analysed by other groups from a multimedia learning perspective – how had the groups utilised sound, pictures and text. The importance of finding a balance between these three aspects was highlighted in the discussion forums and LD entries.

All the information was disseminated electronically (videos, online lectures, files, messages etc.) and all of the communication between students and lecturers was through the course forums, social media or email. This, as mentioned earlier in this paper, has an influence on communication and was reflected upon and commented on in many LD entries. These comments included problems and misunderstandings encountered during the course, as well as positive experiences in regards to communication. The negative aspects were important to experience, but were, at the same time, a challenge for the lecturers as it was necessary to ensure that student motivation did not suffer because of these negative aspects. The problem of establishing and maintaining the “virtual culture” learning environment was particularly a challenge for the teachers. Communication in the form of problems and questions flowed in from many directions. Channelling the discussion to the course forums helped communication to become open and visible, and it also saved time (as most of the questions were similar). Sometimes the teachers had to copy/paste email messages received from students into the forum to strengthen this communication culture.

Differences in responding to e-communications were evident *“our communication style is not effective enough because ever since I sent him a mail, I never got a reply back and that frustrated me and left me confused...”* (LD). This was evident in many LD entries and it seems as if some students left communication and assignments to the last minute. One positive aspect of using Moodle was that any messages in the course forums also went to the students' email. Therefore there was a constant reminder what was happening in the course. However, it has also been generally observed by us that some students did not check their educational email that often and *“...it is hard to catch the person, if he doesn't want to answer. He or she just doesn't mind to answer for your e-mail and that's it.”* (LD). Some of the students

reflected on the 'less-committed' attitude towards the VLE: "...virtual courses are easy to forgot (you don't see your group mates who would remind you)" (LD). Therefore it was important that the communication process was facilitated as much as possible and student queries were quickly responded to ensure that their motivation did not deteriorate. This facilitation was actually noticed and remarked on in the student feedback as some students reflected very deeply on how their communication had improved during the course.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, this course was approached with the assumption that the virtual course and e-tools would be treated as a culture themselves. It was anticipated that the majority of the students would not have the technical knowledge to fulfil all of the tasks during the course. This meant that new technical situations and experiences would be faced and hopefully overcome either individually or as a team. As expected there were a lot of comments on the e-tools. Many of the students had never made videos, shared them on YouTube, communicated through various channels such as Skype, Messenger, Facebook etc. or knew how to use some applications such as Prezi or Google Docs. This was also reflected upon in the course feedback, where students wished for a more thorough introduction to the available ICT tools. During this period of acquiring the required IT skills, many negative feelings were encountered including shame at not being able to do something. However, students also mentioned that they were proud of their achievements once they had mastered certain IT skills and had actually shared them with others afterwards. One extremely interesting comment was on time usage while studying in a virtual course: "...the special challenge for this course is that we need to do the work during our spare time (weekends, evenings) after the actual school day." (LD)

Research has shown that email and other e-communication allow for response time, which facilitates the possibility to reread and reflect on the content of messages and students "*feel more comfortable and confident*" having "*enough time to think about what [to] say in most suitable way*" (LD). The fact that this was a virtual course and the majority of communication was conducted either through social media or email with no 'physical' face-to-face communication was viewed as both positive and negative. Even when video or speech functions were available, i.e. in Skype, some students still preferred to use written communication: "... my partner's English is not so fluent that talking may be more difficult for us to communicate. However, when we use writing, she would have enough time to think." (LD)

Another problem in this virtual implementation was group formation. Teachers decided to facilitate the group forming process by initially splitting the enrollees into ten groups with three members per group. These groups were divided so that different UASs were represented in each group and also different nationalities. However, this did not materialize as hoped as there were students who did not show and there were many dropouts during the course. The initial idea was to get the groups to interact and exchange contact details in the initial synchronous session which proved very challenging as some of the enrolled students did not attend. This required emergency group forming while paying attention to the original group forming criteria. In the end it proved easier to encourage students to be active in the group forming process themselves by writing in the course forums if they were having trouble. The high dropout was actually discussed in one of the LD entries: "*I think it is because students thought, that it will be just an easy course to have points. And they didn't understand, that it will be the real school course with real tasks*" (LD). It also became apparent that the following sociological differences were mentioned as reasons for group forming problems: studying in different UASs; age differences; marital and family differences; geographical location. This was interesting as intercultural differences were not really mentioned (only in one LD entry) as a hindrance to the process. More general competences, such as the need for open communication and listening, were highlighted for improving group work. Some of the LD entries reflected on the problems and misunderstandings encountered in the group work and how they were resolved: Group work caused feelings of frustration and anger and students actually reflected on what they did to alleviate and correct the situations. The final aspect that was interesting from a group perspective was the formation of roles in groups. For group work to succeed, it seemed as if one or two members needed to take on a leader's role. In some groups this did not happen and they found it difficult to agree on deadlines and resolve differences: "*I found also our weak point in a group...we don't have any leader or the person who eager to lead the group*" (LD).

5 Discussion

The results indicate that students understood the importance of *choosing a shared language*, both to themselves and for the others, i.e. the concept of creating a linguistic third culture was seen as the core skill in communicating this intercultural VLE. *Using a foreign language* was seen as important, but also challenging, as some students felt their identity was partly lost when communicating in a foreign language. So a language was not merely seen as a tool, but also a part of one's identity. English was chosen as the language of communication, even if it did not have to be English –no-one questioned its position. In addition, native speakers of a given language were seen as having an advantage. However, there were positive feelings towards foreign language use, too, since students were e.g. able to separate personal feelings from grammatical aspects to their own advantage. Learning the other party's native language was seen as an asset in being accepted to the surrounding community. Teachers can aid in this part of the process a lot, since they

can decide the language, modes of communication, team formation etc. Teaching virtual courses demands a lot more background work and a keen eye on individual, pair and team communication, too.

Results indicate that *attitudinal orientation* in successful intercultural communication is crucial. This virtual course was based on individual work that had to be negotiated within a small group and in groups that submitted their tasks the attitude towards either virtual work or communication or both was positive. Leaving the course or leaving tasks undone might have resulted, as LD entries indicate, on realising that virtual courses actually demand a lot of work in both the substance and in communication. Virtual courses seem to require a very active orientation and a communicative attitude towards course work. Additionally, it appears the course was seen as something extra, because the tasks were done “after school hours”. This is important as now when e-learning is being marketed as learning that can be done ‘anytime and anywhere’, it is still evident that the boundaries of ‘own’ and ‘study’ time are difficult to draw. If this is so, it is interesting because it means the whole *culture of e-learning needs to be rethought* – some people view it as something in addition to their studies that encroaches on extra-curricular time. This is an aspect that is also extremely relevant from the lecturers’ point of view, too, as they often found themselves responding to queries outside ‘normal’ working times to ensure that the course ran smoothly. Both teachers and students need to understand that working on virtual courses requires an active orientation towards individual and teamwork and that the workload is not consistent, nor is it restricted to office hours.

Resolving communicative conflicts was also seen as a challenge with delays in answering a message, and not meeting face-to-face being the key issues. Communicative conflicts also illustrate the crucial role of *time-orientation* in nonverbal communication, which is highlighted more in a virtual environment. Even if the students were from diverse backgrounds, intercultural differences were not really mentioned (only in one LD entry) as a hindrance to the process. More *general competences*, such as the need for open communication and listening, were highlighted for improving group work. *Group formation* was challenging for the lecturers due to the various challenges of VLEs compared to contact lessons. The groups themselves commented on the difficulties in *establishing suitable roles and group leaders*, resulting in difficulties in doing given group tasks. In this aspect of the course, the teachers ought to take an active role in guiding students to ensure effective and appropriate communication.

There were special challenges, however, in the VLE. Research has shown that email and other e-communication allow for response time, which facilitates the possibility to reread and reflect on the content of messages, and ultimately lets communication occur in such a manner that is both acceptable to others and comfortable to oneself. However, *e-communication* can also result in somewhat special communication challenges in the virtual classroom. Firstly, special attention needs to be paid to communicative competence in *self-disclosure*. On the present course it was either left out or delayed, resulting in formal communication instead of informal, more relaxed communication. Self-disclosure was reported to be either very easy or very difficult, so clearly it divided opinions. All participants had to put a lot of effort into creating *neutral and clear messages*, which became easier after the initial culture shock. Finding a balance between one’s preferred method of communication and general course requirements or peer pressure was crucial for success and creating a working group with suitable roles for all was reported to be demanding. Students seemed to learn a lot about themselves as communicators, but they did not see that virtual communication took much more effort and time than face-to-face communication in order to be effective. This course was (seemingly) task-oriented, but ultimately it also enhanced personal communication skills. This was highlighted in one of the LD entries which we feel was the best feedback we could ever receive on the course:

This study unit gave me an opportunity to realize communication’s role in my life. As each adult person, I understood its importance before, but now I can say that I know much more about communication, it’s methods, it’s history and especially about intercultural communication. With knowledge, gained during this study unit, I understand better how communication works and what methods or tools people are using to keep information flowing. Maybe I will take a topic “communication in organizations” for the final thesis, and it will definitely contain a section “intercultural communication”.

As expected, acquiring new *IT skills* was seen as challenging but rewarding. It is important to notice that in the present research the aspects of intercultural communication competence were overshadowed by the challenges in IT skills. Feelings of frustration and anger were mentioned by a few people in regards to the teamwork and technological tools. These feelings were important to experience and the students actually reflected on what they did to alleviate and correct the situations. These feelings were also important as they reflect similarities to culture shock and support our premise that a VLE can be considered to be a culture *per se*.

Development suggestions fall into two categories. Firstly, virtual communication and the development of VLEs need to be facilitated and the necessary competences need to be taught in higher educational institutions as well as work places to ensure that conflicts are minimised and ‘culture shock’ experiences are alleviated. This would ensure that virtual intercultural communication when transferred to the workplace, is as efficient and understanding as possible. To reach

these goals a broader use of e-tools should be encouraged during studies in higher education institutes. Secondly, the concept of a 'virtual, third culture' needs to be researched further from both team work and e-communication perspectives. Both teachers and students need to be aware of the different skills dimensions required in virtual working teams and understand that they will have to adjust their communication to suit the virtual world. Building a third culture in a virtual learning environment is challenging, but it can be done if there are enough resources for the teachers to plan, evaluate and facilitate communication throughout the course and enough understanding for all participants of information, skills and communication processes needed on the course. This kind of information would, perhaps, aid in fostering positive attitudes towards using various languages, e-tools and working methods.

The final comment from a student sums up the positive aspect of working in an intercultural team:

"There are always communication problems between different people from different cultures. But do not be afraid of communication. When people from different cultures work together, something new or surprising may appear." (LD)

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